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The Old Gang

By William V. Shannon

WASHINGTON, Oct. 5—John W. Dean strikes again.

The former White House counsel's detailed and accurate testimony before the Senate Watergate Committee in June, 1973, started Richard Nixon out of the White House and H. R. Haldeman and John Ehrlichman on their way to the grand jury.

Now a freelance journalist, Mr. Dean has ruined Earl Butz by recounting the latter's horrid racist anecdote to the readers of Rolling Stone.

Like a flash of lightning above a haunted house, the brief return of John Dean to the center of events in Washington serves to remind everyone that the Ford Administration is run by the old Nixon gang, the hard-core loyalists who stuck with him through every lying twist and turn to the day of his resignation. As each new piece of evidence about his criminal involvements became known, they stood and brazenly defended him.

The most important defender was Mr. Ford himself. Speaking in Muncie, Ind., on July 24, 1974, only two weeks before the Nixon resignation, Mr. Ford told a Republican audience: "I've watched the [impeachment] proceedings unravel as they have beginning in 1973. I've read the testimony. I've talked to people who are involved in the House Judiciary Committee.

"I can say from the bottom of my heart that the President of the United States is innocent. He is right."

At that late date, Mr. Ford was still dismissing the whole thing as mostly a partisan frame-up.

"Not all, but a substantial amount of the effort against the President is an attempt to try to undo the election results of 1972, and don't forget it," he said.

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A week earlier, Rabbi Baruch M. Korff had held one of his rallies here to demonstrate support for Mr. Nixon. One speaker was Secretary Butz. Another was Mrs. Anne Armstrong, then a top-ranking White House aide. The Times reported: "When Mrs. Armstrong, a counselor to Mr. Nixon, castigated the press, she received a standing ovation."

After he became President, Mr. Ford rewarded Mrs. Armstrong with the ambassadorship to Great Britain. Another Nixon stalwart was George Bush, the G.O.P. national chairman. Mr. Ford rewarded him with the ambassadorship to China and, more recently, the directorship of the C.I.A.

Alexander M. Haig was Mr. Nixon's staff chief and tireless defender, instrumental in firing one special prosecutor and trying [illegible] a second. President Ford restored him to his rank as a full general in the Army, and named him NATO commander.

As C.I.A. chief, Richard Helms learned a lot about the dirty business of the Nixon Administration. He became Ambassador to Iran and Mr. Ford has retained him in that sensitive outpost. So also has he retained or promoted influential Nixon men in the Cabinet and in countless second-level positions.

Mr. Ford's political "kitchen Cabinet" consists of men who were in the White House bunker trying to save Mr. Nixon in his last desperate months—Dean Burch, William Timmons, Melvin Laird and Rogers Morton. Mr. Ford's agent in the South is old Nixon hand Harry Dent. To hold Texas, he is relying upon John Connally.

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Only two major officials resigned over Watergate—Elliot Richardson and William Ruckelshaus. President Ford fobbed off Mr. Richardson with the relatively unimportant job of Commerce Secretary and has appointed Mr. Ruckelshaus to nothing.

The rest of the Nixon team proved themselves careerists quite able to suppress any embarrassment they may have felt or any convictions they may have held. As Congress, the courts and the special prosecutor closed in on Mr. Nixon, they went on whistling "Hail to the Chief." Their crassness has been rewarded. Mr. Ford kept them in office for another two years and the nation may now keep them in for another four.

The ultimate expression of the old gang's arrogance was the selection of Senator Bob Dole—Mr. Nixon's favorite hatchet man—for Vice President. Four years ago, Senator Dole led the propaganda attack on the press for its attempts to get at the truth about Watergate. As recently as May, 1974, after most of the tapes had become known, Senator Dole said he would welcome Mr. Nixon's help in his campaign for re-election.

Why worry about political ethics? A party that would accept Bob Dole as its Vice-Presidential candidate and a nation that would buy the idea that Gerald Ford has cleaned house in Washington are a party and a nation that would obviously believe anything.

As the sage of San Clemente sits in the setting sun and fabricates his memoirs, he must occasionally rub his hands and smile a rare saturnine smile at the thought that Jerry and Bob and all the old gang may actually get away with it. It does rather confirm his hero P. T. Barnum's wise saying: "No man ever went broke underestimating the taste of the public."

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